

Massasoit's Role in the Mayflower Pilgrims' Story

At the time of the Pilgrim's arrival, the Wampanoag nation inhabited what is known today as southeastern Massachusetts. The name "Wampanoag" meant "People of the East," and this Indian tribe was so named because they were the first to see the sun rising over the Atlantic each morning. Neighboring tribes knew them as the "Pokanoket," which translates to "place of the cleared land." An estimated 22,500 Wampanoag were living in New England in the early 1600s, and they had built a thriving and well-established society. With a vast knowledge in New England farming techniques and expertise in fishing, hunting, and foraging, the Wampanoag were a successful Indian tribe at the time of the Pilgrim's arrival. The tribe had formed a system of both religion and government. The government of the Wampanoag federation, like many Native American governments, was led by a chief who was known as the Great Sachem. Called "Massasoit" by the Pilgrims, Ousamequin (also written Wassamagoin, Woosamequin, Aumequin, Oosamequen, etc.) became the Great Sachem of the Wampanoag Nation in the early seventeenth century.

Very little is known or recorded about Massasoit's ancestry or history prior to his encounters with the English. It has been speculated that he was born in the early 1580s in the Pokanoket village of Montaup. Massasoit had three sons and two daughters that we are aware of, although some have opined that he possibly had an earlier family that died as a result of plagues induced by English presence. The first suspected meeting between Massasoit and the English was in May of 1619, when both he and his brother briefly met Captain Thomas Dermer. However, the first encounter between the Mayflower Pilgrims and Massasoit took place in March of 1621.

Just prior to Massasoit's meeting with the Pilgrims, it is believed that tragedy struck the Wampanoag nation. Prior to the Pilgrims' arrival, "The Great Dying" overtook many of the Algonquin tribes along the Atlantic Coast from 1616 to 1619. The plague had a devastating effect on the Wampanoag population, with an estimated two-thirds of the people perishing. This decrease in numbers meant an increase in vulnerability, specifically with the Narragansetts to the south. Massasoit knew something had to be done to restore security to the Wampanoag nation – this was the uncertain mindset of the Great Sachem when the Pilgrims arrived.

Although the Wampanoags had suffered drastic losses, they still outnumbered the Pilgrims and would have been easily able to obliterate the newly established colony. Massasoit refrained from doing so, which some have speculated to be a strategic political move. After the Pilgrims had been proven friendly by their encounters with Indians such as Samoset and Squanto, the Great Sachem Massasoit came to Plymouth for himself, at which time a peace agreement was signed. The treaty laid out several terms, some of which were as follows: neither party nor any of its members was to harm the other party, and if the former provision was encroached, the guilty party would be sent for punishment; the leaders of both parties would enforce a rule against robbery and return stolen property; both parties would come to the aid of the other in case of war; and when the parties met officially, no weapons (bows or guns) would be present. These conditions were beneficial to both parties, providing for trade, protection, and security for the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags. This treaty was also important because it began a fifty-four year friendship between the Wampanoags, specifically Massasoit, and the Pilgrims. In fact, it is recorded that in March of 1623, an English settler named Edward Winslow made an emergency journey to help the dangerously ill Massasoit. After he was cured, Massasoit is said

to have made the following statement: “Now I see the English are my friends and love me. And whilst I live I will never forget the kindness they have shown me.” The Great Sachem sold tracts of land to the Pilgrims in 1653 and 1657, and the Pilgrims came to his aid in several situations. It was a mutually beneficial relationship.

The importance of Massasoit’s role in the Pilgrims’ story is invaluable. The Sachem’s decisions regarding the Pilgrims provided peace, food security, and protection in the crucial early years of the colony’s development. Massasoit played a massively important role in the story of the Pilgrims, one that many people likely are not aware of. Without Massasoit, the fledgling colony of Plymouth, and thus the Pilgrims, may not have survived.

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